

Safety requires breaking the cycle of risky behavior

No one is beyond taking a safety risk, but we should be.

The president of a safety, environmental and business consulting firm (we'll call him Brad), tells the story of his wife purchasing an unassembled tricycle for their grandson and asking Brad to assemble it well before the boy arrived for his birthday celebration. Thinking "How hard can it be?" Brad put the task off until minutes before the family was scheduled to arrive.

As it turned out, the process was more complicated than he'd thought. Working against the clock, he felt a stinging pain as a screwdriver slipped from its mark and found the palm of his hand.

He often tells that story during presentations.

"When you change a light bulb in your dining room, we probably all know you should go out into the garage and get the stepladder and move the dining-room table, but usually you just stand on a chair. And we get away with it, for the most part," Brad says.

That type of behavior is reinforced every time a risk is taken without incident, whether it's cutting the lawn in sandals or standing on the top rung of a ladder in the workplace.

"That's the frustration we sometimes encounter. You are trying to get people to do things properly, but they have been doing things improperly for so long and getting away with it that the behavior is difficult to change," he says.

We would be rich if we had a dollar for every time an injured employee told us: "I don't know what happened. I've been doing this job for 20 years and I've never been hurt before."

The truth is we hurt ourselves most often as a result of our actions. I call it lack of present-moment thinking.

Over time, people will develop "habit strength," such as buckling their seat belt without even thinking about it when getting into a car. "Those techniques work very well when we don't introduce any other factors, such as being tired, frustrated or in a hurry," Brad says.

But what happens to the normally careful driver who sleeps through an alarm and is running 15 minutes late for work? Chances are good he or she is tailgating, cursing and speeding on the commute to work.

The same situation frequently occurs in the workplace itself.

When you introduce such factors or influences as haste into the work environment — in response to the machine being down, the work not progressing as planned or schedule demands not being met — all of a sudden we begin to work outside the boundaries of common-sense-safety.

A worker will make more critical errors in a state of haste, fatigue, frustration or complacency.

Wouldn't it be better if we could step back from that state, take a deep breath and realize, I'm going to get hurt doing this? Brad calls this approach of taking a step backward "advanced safety awareness." Wouldn't we be safer if we responded that way all the time, at home and at work?

Let's practice it. ■

Commentary
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